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ABSTRACT

A group of elementary teachers enrolled in a graduate class in language arts at the University of North Dakota explored how children construct their own meanings as they interact with texts. One teacher regularly read to her 20-month-old grandson, and excerpts from the journal she kept reveal that his understanding of a specific text evolved to the point where he was constructing his own special meanings. A second teacher read extensively to a 4-year-old boy, asked him to discuss the stories, and invited him to tell an original story based on a theme from the one they had just read. The boy's story had some relationship to the one the teacher read to him, but he chose to invert a number of themes, thus creating his own meanings. A third teacher asked her fifth-grade students to write reports and creative stories after observing an ant farm. The report allowed students to read and write about those aspects of ant life they found interesting, while the creative assignment encouraged them to consider the world from an ant's perspective. These teachers viewed comprehension as the result of a personal quest for meaning and encouraged their students in this quest. (AEW)

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New Perspectives on Comprehension

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As part of formal reading instruction, teachers are asked to assess comprehension. To assess comprehension usually means to ask students a series of questions about the content of basal stories or textbook chapters. Students perceived as having "good" comprehension can answer the questions well. Students perceived as having "poor" comprehension experience difficulty stating an author's main idea, discussing character motivation, or remembering details of the story or text. Within this view of comprehension, there is little emphasis on observing the meaning-making process of particular children or on encouraging the construction of unique meanings by individual children. A question-answer notion of comprehension assumes that there is only one meaning and that all children have to be able to express that meaning in order for learning to take place.

A group of teachers enrolled in a graduate class in language arts at the University of North Dakota explored how children create individual meanings as they interact with texts. Each teacher either worked with an individual child or with a classroom of children, observing the process of meaning construction and developing strategies which encouraged the children to explore and express their individualized meanings. Although teachers did not abandon the idea that readers need to understand an author's message, they focused more on studying how children bring to the reading of texts their own knowledge and interests, and how children utilize aspects of another author's meaning in their own meaning-making endeavors. Comprehension was viewed as the result of a personal search for meaning.

The teachers utilized a variety of kinds of texts and open-ended strategies to help children construct their meanings. The reading of children's literature selections tied to the interests of individual children was a very important strategy. The themes and ideas expressed in the children's literature encouraged the children to explore those themes and ideas in their own lives. The creative writing of stories and oral storytelling became important vehicles of meaning exploration. In addition, open-ended discussions, shared book readings, adaptations of the author's text, and multiple encounters with the same text or thematically related texts all encouraged children to explore their personal meanings.

In this article examples from three of the teachers will be discussed. Rosemarie Vasichek, a veteran North Dakota elementary teacher, regularly read to her twenty-month-old grandson, Michael. Excerpts from the journal that she kept will reveal the special meanings that Michael was constructing and his evolving understanding of one specific text through repeated readings. Shirley Aafedt, a graduate student in Reading Education at UND, worked with a four-year-old neighbor and explored the relationship between the texts read to the child and the

oral stories told by the child. Irene Johnson, a fifth grade teacher at Drayton Public School, studied the meanings which children created while participating in a science unit. Students in her classroom observed the behaviors of ants living in an ant farm, read a series of self-selected books to learn more about ants, and wrote reports and stories about the ants. The activities of these teachers encouraged the personal construction of meaning by the children with whom they were working.

A Two-Year-Old Making Meaning

In October Rosemarie Vasichek read her grandson, Michael, Where's Spot? (Hill, 1980). She chose this book to read to Michael because it was predictable, could be manipulated physically by a young child, and dealt with the topic of dogs and puppies. The word "puppy" had just become part of Michael's spoken language. Michael was very interested in puppies and Rosemarie thought the book would encourage a strong personal response. Where's Spot? is the story of a mother dog looking for her pup. Readers help the mother dog in her search for the pup by lifting up flaps which represent objects under which the puppy might be hiding. For example, the text reads, "Is he under the stairs?," and when the flap is raised the word "no" is printed. At the end of the story, the mother dog finds the puppy in his basket and takes him to eat his food.

After reading Where's Spot? for the first time to Michael, Rosemarie recorded the following journal entry. It is important to notice how Rosemarie documented Michael's meaning-making attempts as he interacted with the text.

I brought home Where's Spot? by Eric Hill. The puppy dog on the cover caught Michael's attention right away. He listened to the story all the way through the first time without joining in in any way. The second time through he lifted the flaps and started saying "no" when we got to the alligator under the bed. When he found the turtle under the rug it was still "no." He grinned broadly when we got to Spot in the basket. After two readings he sat and played with the book for a long time, lifting flaps and often saying "no" when doing so. He understood the puppy hadn't eaten his food, but the fact that mother dog was looking for him didn't make sense until we played "Where's Grandpa?" (a game in which his grandfather hides and we try to find him). He did not understand the concept of "name" when I asked what the puppy's name was. This was Michael's first experience with a book in which I read the text. To this point it has been mainly labeling of objects, animals, etc. He thoroughly enjoyed the story, I would say.

Michael was constructing meaning as he read the text. He attended to the picture on the front cover and listened to the entire text as his grandmother read it to him. By the second reading, he was lifting the flaps himself and contributing the word "no" occasionally as he listened to the text. Because he was only twenty months old, he could not verbally express his response to the story, but his attention, his smiles, his lifting of the flaps, his use of the word "no," and his extended self-selected interaction with the book suggested that Michael was actively making meaning.

Michael's grandmother facilitated his meaning-making attempts. Her choice of a book tied appropriately to an interest he had at the moment was probably her most significant contribution. In addition, the fact that Rosemarie allowed for multiple readings of the text and

allowed Michael to interact alone with the text also encouraged his construction of meaning. Because the book was predictable, Michael quite easily learned a portion of the text pattern. Thus, he began very early on to respond verbally to the text. The lifting of flaps also encouraged his active participation.

There were aspects of the story which Michael did not understand. Rosemarie made decisions based on Michael's knowledge about which aspects of the story content she could extend. The game of "Where's Grandpa?" helped stress the searching dimension of the story when it appeared that Michael did not understand this part of the story. The fact that Michael did not apparently attend to the puppy's name was ignored by his grandmother for the moment.

During the next two weeks, Michael continued to read Where's Spot? Rosemarie's journal entry for the last week of October expressed Michael's persisting interest in the book and his continuing meaning-making endeavors. His grandmother also continued her efforts to help him expand his understanding of the text. This second journal entry is found below.

...Michael looks at the Spot book often. He wants the puppy to come eat. He mistakes, I think, the Mother dog shown in the pictures for the lost little dog so he still has a hard time understanding WHY we are looking for a puppy when there is already one there. I have substituted the words "little puppy, Spot" for the pronoun "he" most of the time in the question, "Is he in the...?" I have also elaborated the text on the page where Sally, the mother dog, finds Spot in the basket.

When I took the book back to the library the night of my class, Michael was not at all happy to see it go. I promised to bring another book and that settled him down.

Michael's interest in the book was reflected in his frequent choosing of the book for reading. He was also unhappy when his grandmother had to return the book. Because of the repeated readings, Michael was able to explore dimensions of the story which he did not understand in the initial reading. Because his grandmother was observing his meaning construction process, she was able to help him resolve his questions. When Michael continued to express confusion about why everyone was looking for a puppy dog when there already was a dog on every page (i.e., he confused the picture of the mother dog for the puppy dog). Rosemarie attempted to resolve his concern by changing the text to make it clearer. She substituted a concrete referent, "little puppy, Spot," for the pronoun in the text. However, even in subsequent reading, Michael never quite totally resolved the question even with the help of his grandmother.

Rosemarie brought home Where's Spot? again two months later. In January, Rosemarie made another journal entry dealing with Michael's response to the book. Although Michael by now had read the book numerous times, he still continued to make meaning. The following journal entry describes aspects of his evolving meaning-making attempts.

I brought out Where's Spot? again today. Michael grinned when he saw the book cover and said, "puppy dog lookin' in a box." He did not answer when asked, "What is Mama puppy dog looking for?" I still think he's having the same problem of looking for a dog when one is pictured, though he thoroughly enjoys looking for a puppy under the flaps! At the third flap

in addition to saying "no," he added, "That's a lion." From there on he joined in all the no's. He lifts all the flaps himself, calls the penguins "gucks" (ducks). I think he has picked up on the fact that the turtle under the rug doesn't say "no" because he stops and says nothing when he lifts the rug and looks up at me. He is super eager to turn pages. When we get to the puppy in the basket he says, "Puppy in there, puppy in the baket (basket)." "Come eat, puppy." (The latter he gets from my added text.) On the last page he is delighted and proudly announces, "See, gamma, puppy eating supper." I notice he brings the word "supper" in from the first page.

For the first time ever, he noticed the mama and puppy on the back cover where Sally dog is on her back playing with Spot. Michael put his cheek up against them and said, "Nice puppy." We read the book through three times before he was satisfied. Then he slid off my lap and showed a few pages to Grandpa. Then he set the book on the floor and came back to it about a half hour later. He turned a few pages, lifted a few flaps and said, "No, no. Is puppy in a closet? No, no." and then he closed the book. He looked at the back cover and said, "I pull puppy's ear." I replied, "That's mean, Mikey!" He put the book on the floor and went to play with his pull and bang xylophone.

I have bought tons of books at rummage sales. One I dug out of the stockpile was Who's Your Furry Friend? It goes on along the same line asking, "Who's your furry friend?" "Is it a goat in a boat," "Is it an ape with a cape," are the kinds of text patterns. All the while you are able to touch this fur through a hole provided in each setting. In the end you come to the page where it is a cat on a mat. The "no" answer is carried through the whole book too. He gets a real charge out of the similarity, I think.

By now, Michael quickly recognized the book and verbally expressed some of its content (i.e., "puppy dog lookin' in a box"). He also included more text in his oral reading of the story. He was able to formulate a regular pattern for the text which by now was very much like the original text pattern. He described the animals who were hiding under the flaps. He did not read the word "no" on the one page where it did not occur in the story. Michael also interpreted the ending of the text for his grandmother. When he finished the story, he explained to her, "See, gamma, puppy eating supper." This was quite a change from the very first reading in October in which he said nothing.

Michael's personal interest in the text did not diminish over the three-month period. He still smiled when he saw the book, he was eager to turn the pages, he affectionately touched the picture of the puppy with his cheek, and he even thought of alternate ways of interacting with the puppy (i.e., "I pull puppy's ear"). The multiple readings of the book and the strategies which his grandmother developed for him encouraged his continued meaning-making endeavors. If he had only been given the opportunity to hear the story once, the extent of his meaning-making would have been diminished.

A Four-Year-Old Making Meaning

Shirley Aafedt worked with a four-year-old boy who lived next door to her. This child had been read to extensively and was also encouraged by his parents to express his reactions to stories and to tell his own original stories. Shirley read "Paul" (not his real name) a

variety of children's literature books, asked him to discuss the stories, and asked him either at that time or a week later to tell an original story based on a theme from the one he had just read. The example given here is the story which Paul told after hearing Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963). Where the Wild Things Are is the story of a boy, Max, and the dream he has. The boy is sent to his room without supper because he has been bad. He falls asleep (although this is not totally obvious in the story), his bed becomes a boat, and he sails to the land of the wild things who make Max their king. After a series of adventures, he returns home, wakes up, and finds that his mother has brought him dinner after all. Paul enjoyed the Sendak story and could easily retell it. His subsequent original oral story, however, best revealed the special meanings that Paul was able to construct. The transcribed version of Paul's story is found below.

I always wanted a magic horse. One day I walked out on my balcony with my brother and there he was. I told my brother to go tell mom we were going for a ride, but I decided to go for a ride alone so I left him. My horse and I went to the playground to play. I played on the long slide. Actually there were two slides, one in the front and one in the back. The horse was scared to go down the slide. It was too steep for him. It wasn't too steep for me. Both the front slide and the back slide led underground. Underneath the ground there were wires. The horse didn't want me to go down there because the wires could kill me. They were electric wires and they could kill me, also telephone wires. So the horse wouldn't cry, I didn't go underneath the ground. There were swings there, too. The horse was going on one of the swings. The swing that the horse was going on broke and the horse was flung into the sky and hung onto a cloud. The swing kept on going and going and going and it will never stop. And I said, "Where's my horse? Where is it?" I looked up in the sky and there he was, hanging onto a cloud. So I ran home and jumped into my airplane and went as fast as a jet racing car up to the horse. When I was close enough to the horse to grab him, I grabbed him and I pulled him in and then we went down to the playground. I jumped on my horse, but it was thundering and it was too late to go home. We couldn't see so it was too dark to go home. When it was done, we went home because we were too wet, and mommy wanted us to put on nice dry clothes that she had washed. She said, "Hey, put these on, P.T." I didn't put them on because I didn't like those clothes. My mommy said, "Hey, you put those clothes on right now." I said, "My horse will have you and take you up to the moon and drop you off without a space suit if you yell at me one more time." She said, "You don't have a horse, you're just dreamin'." Then I said, "You yelled at me. I'm going to tell my horse to take you up in space and that's that." Then I woke up.

The story which Paul told was loosely tied to the experience of listening to Where the Wild Things Are. Paul, like Sendak, discussed the themes of childhood adventure, journey, danger, and anger towards adults. There was also a magic horse which served the function of transporting Paul to new places, much like the bed/boat in the Sendak story. Very similarly to Sendak, Paul did not reveal the fact that the story was a dream until the end. Even though his story had some relationship to the Sendak text, however, Paul's own unique meanings were clearly being expressed. His previous experience with storytelling

clearly enabled him to construct such a powerful personal text.

The character in Paul's story had adventures and experienced dangers closely tied to Paul's real life. The character found a magic horse on his balcony (Paul himself lives in an apartment with a balcony), went to the playground (a common play area), and confronted typical childhood dangers (electric wires). The elements of fantasy occurred around these more familiar settings and situations.

Paul also described a character who was quite different from the Max presented in Where the Wild Things Are. Paul stressed the courageous aspect of his character and his ability to perform amazing feats such as the rescue of a magic horse. Despite all of his courageous feats, however, Paul's character was unappreciated at home. The anger that the character felt was directed at this lack of adult recognition and appreciation. Thus, Paul's story focused on childhood adventure and journey with the anger dimension being secondary to this main theme. The Sendak story is just the opposite.

If Shirley had stopped at the retelling of the Sendak text, she would have felt that Paul had good comprehension of a specific text. She would not have noticed, however, Paul's abilities to make a personal meaning around the same themes that Sendak discussed. She would also not have noticed the unique way Paul was able to develop a character, a setting, and a series of events to express the themes he wished to convey. Hearing Paul's own story showed Shirley more of Paul than she would see in a simple retelling. In addition, by providing Paul with an opportunity to tell his own story, Shirley was encouraging him to further his response to Where the Wild Things Are and to explore meanings crucial to his own life and interests.

Meaning Making in a Fifth Grade Classroom

Children construct individual meanings in all areas of the curriculum. Irene Johnson explored ways to better understand the meanings that her fifth grade students were constructing in response to a science unit on ants. After students had spent some time observing ants in an ant farm, Irene asked them to write reports and a creative story. The report allowed students to read and write about those areas of ant life which they found interesting. The creative writing assignment, which had to be written from an ant's perspective, encouraged students to imaginatively reflect on how ants perceived the world.

One student, referred to as "Julie," wrote the following factual report. In her report, Julie focused primarily on those aspects of ant life which seemed amazing compared to human life. Julie essentially stressed in her report all kinds of physical feats which ants could accomplish and which humans could not. Her text reads,

Ants

Ants are about the closest insects to being human, because they resemble our ways very much. But they can do many things human beings can not.

For one thing ants can go without food for a great part of the year. An ant can carry something at least 10 times larger than itself. Ants do not communicate as we do. They rub their antennae to communicate,

or ants communicate by the scent of each other.

An ant can live after being under water for seventy hours. Also some ants can live without air for eight days. In one experiment, an ant that had its head cut off remained alive for forty-one days. It could still walk two days before it died.

There are 8,000 different kinds of ants. Its closest relatives are bees, wasps, and hornets. Ants do not weigh very much. It takes about 100,000 average-sized ants to weigh as much as a man. The ant is an amazing and very unusual insect.

The same student also wrote the creative story which is presented below. Even though Julie was taking the perspective of an ant, she, nevertheless, maintained her emphasis in portraying the ant as capable of amazing feats. Her text reads,

My New Home

Hi I'm Annie the Ant. I'm a harvestor ant. I live in a factory in a box of dirt with all the other harvestor ants, and the queen ant.

Last week I got shipped from Cleveland to Nevada. It was such a rough trip, I bounced all over the place, and it took quite a long time. I was sent in a dark box with the other harvestor ants including the queen ant.

I arrived in a very large room with many desks and kids. When I was dropped into a clear plastic container filled with dirt, I felt dizzy and sick. There was alot of kids staring at me, and making lots of noise. This was my new home. I just loved it!

Now, its been a week, it was tiring but finally we have made all of our tunnels. For food we get a small portion of an apple every day, which is more than enough. A few harvestor ants have died because of the sudden change of environment, but I'm hanging in there.

I think it feels good to be an ant, and I'm glad I live where I do.

In her story, Julie stressed the fact that the ant had survived despite being bounced all over in a long trip, despite being dizzy and sick, despite being placed in a new environment which consisted of noisy and staring children, and despite having to create a whole new set of tunnels in which to live. Julie also stressed the fact that despite all these adventures the ant was quite happy. She concluded by saying, "I think it feels good to be an ant, and I'm glad I live where I do." This positive, energetic view of ants was conveyed in both her report and her story.

Because Irene asked students to complete both assignments, she received a fuller impression of the special meanings which they were creating. In both of her written works, Julie explored the varied kinds of adaptations which ants could make and the resiliency they had making these adaptations. Other students in Irene's class focused on other kinds of meaning. The open-ended nature of the writing assignments coupled with the direct observation of ant life allowed for these variable meanings to be explored and expressed. If Irene had asked all students to fill out the same study guide questions, she would not have seen the unique meanings her students were constructing.

Conclusion

These teachers viewed comprehension as the result of a personal quest for meaning. Rather than

stressing the fact that all children had to end up with the same meaning after reading a text, Rosemarie, Shirley, and Irene used text as a way to help children construct personal meanings. They organized classroom activities to allow children to build on their own knowledge and interests. Instead of just asking children to answer questions, these teachers encouraged students to express themselves in a more open-ended fashion. They did not believe that comprehension was a one shot deal; rather, Rosemarie, Shirley, and Irene allowed students to explore meaning over time and in numerous encounters with text.

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Shirley Aafedt teaches classroom management at the University of North Dakota; Norma Anderson is a former elementary teacher; Irene Johnson is a fifth grade teacher at Drayton Public School, Drayton, ND; Jayne Moreland teaches kindergarten at Kelly Elementary School in Grand Forks, ND; Shirley Stein is a first grade teacher at Prairie View School in Devils Lake, ND; and Rosemarie Vasichek was an elementary teacher in North Dakota for 22 years. They are all graduate students in reading education at the University of North Dakota and were participants in a graduate class in language arts curriculum.

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